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WOMEN IN GOVERNMENT

Sybil Francis works for ‘seamless’ education system

BY MADELYN BURKE

Arizona Capitol Times correspondent

Sybil Francis is always determined to improve. Whether it is the nation as a whole or the state of Arizona, she has made a career out of the betterment of the homeland.

Francis, who holds a Ph.D. in political science from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, is committed to the improvement of local policy, as she chairs a subcommittee of the Governor’s P-20 Council while holding the title of executive director of the Center for the Future of Arizona, among many other public affiliations. But she also has had years of experience in other areas of politics and policy.

Francis grew up on the East Coast, born and raised in Cambridge, Mass. She is the oldest of three girls in the family, and grew up in a bilingual household with a mother who emigrated to the United States from France.

Her family moved to Washington, D.C., when her father got a job as the director of language training for the Peace Corps.

After graduating college with a B.A. in chemistry, Francis went to work in the nation’s capital, for a member of Congress who was involved in environmental issues, a matter that interested her at the time.

“I guess my view on the world was so much of change and what happens really emerges from changes in science and technology,” Francis said.

In the summer of 2002, Francis and her husband, Michael Crow, president of Arizona State University, moved from the East Coast to Arizona with their 2-year-old daughter.

“I wasn’t quite sure how I was going to make the transition because I was so used to

‘When you’ve been through ups and downs, you realize that there are ups and downs. You don’t want to undercut yourself in the long run by overreacting to the short-run crisis.’

—Sybil Francis

a certain way of being engaged,” Francis said. “It was different to be involved in a state level versus a national level.”

“I’ve never really lived in a state before in that sense,” she added. “I’ve really worked in mostly Washington, D.C., and had kind of a view of the country nationally.”

But after getting involved in the state, Francis has become heavily immersed in local public policy, with a focus on education.

“As a public policy person, I feel equipped to approach public policy problems, whether they’re science and technology or education and other issues,” Francis said.

The fact that she is a mother of an 8-year-old is a factor. She said seeing her child go through the education system now brings the issues a little closer to home.

“Nationally, education is, of course, important. But I think in particular states are really where the action is,” Francis said. “It’s a really major public policy issue of huge importance, and that attracted me. It was kind of a constellation of changes in my life that pointed me in that direction.”

Now that she is heading in that direction, a lot of issues are at hand.



PHOTO BY MADELYN BURKE

Taking care of business

Sybil Francis calls her Center for the Future of Arizona a ‘do-tank.’

Governor's P-20 Council

One of the main focuses of improving the educational system in Arizona is to make it seamless, according to the stated goals of the Governor's P-20 Council.

The P-20 Council is aimed at improving education as a whole, from pre-school through graduate school. Making the transitions between each level of education as seamless as possible is the ideal result, and the council has come a long way.

Francis chairs the P-20 Council's Subcommittee on Improving High School Graduation Rates.

"I think the P-20 Council is really an exciting and brilliant conceptualization," Francis said. "It's really about trying to make all of the different pieces of our educational system from pre-school all the way to graduate school really connect."

"You're one person that needs an education," she added, "so how do you make that whole system look like one system to the user in some ways? How do you connect the different pieces to make sense?"

The council makes recommendations that are taken up by other organizations that can put them into action, Francis explained.

Increasing the high school math requirements was the solution to one problem, Francis said. The graduation requirements from high school did not correspond to what was needed to get into a university, but the change requiring more math in high school will lead to an easier transition to university-level education.

The Arizona she wants

Francis also strives for a better Arizona as a whole, which is the mission of the nonprofit Center for the Future of Arizona (CFA).

Francis co-founded the CFA about five years ago along with Lattie Coor, the former president of Arizona State University. The nonprofit aims to find and fulfill "the Arizona we want."

"What we would like to see is a state that is sustainable," Francis said. "As a state, we're growing rapidly, and that's going to stretch our resources and demand an educated, engaged population. We want a state that can grow while and at the same time the quality of life of the population increases."

"When we say sustainability, it's not just the environment. It's



PHOTO BY MADELYN BURKE

'It's (P-20 Council) really about trying to make all of the different pieces of our educational system, from pre-school all the way to graduate school, really connect.'

– Sybil Francis

really economics and environment," she added. "What goes into those things are things like education, scientific research, innovation, certainly care for the environment."

As this goal presents itself, Francis finds herself coming back full circle to the

environmental issues and experience she pursued in Washington, D.C., 30 years ago.

The CFA is a very small organization, and though they cannot take on every issue that faces Arizona, the center usually tries to have no more than three main goals to ensure that each gets adequate attention.

The 'do-tank'

Francis says the association goes beyond the traditional "think-tank" description and likes to refer to the center as a "do-tank," because not only do they make conclusions from the studies they conduct, but they take responsibility for the information and try to do something with it.

Hurdles have presented themselves, such as the recent budget crisis that Arizona faces.

Francis seems to have a positive perception of where the state is, as well as where it is going, despite any current economical setbacks.

"When you've been through ups and downs, you realize that there are ups and downs," Francis said. "You don't want to undercut yourself in the long run by overreacting to the short-run crisis. Yes, you do need to address it, but you shouldn't be undermining your ability to respond to the educational needs of the state. In the long run, that will hurt the state and make it even harder to get out of any kind of economic crisis."

Crow said of his wife: "Sybil is deeply committed to making America more successful. Here in Arizona she has thrown herself into education policy, but at the end of the day it is all about the same thing: How do you make America better?"

Francis said she's always enjoyed her policy work, which may be a key to her commitment and success.

"It's been fun for me to be here and to see how much energy there is, how much commitment, how much caring there is about the future," Francis said. "I really think we're on an upward trajectory." ■